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The Development of Spiney Lobster Fishing
in Belize, 1920-1977

Belizean Heroes and Patriots:
Dr. Frederick Gahne

Forestry in Belize, Part I: Beginnings
of Modern Forestry and Agriculture, 1921
to 1954





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Belizean Heroes and Patriots: Dr. Frederick Gahne

At the northern end of Barracks Road opposite Ebenezer Church, dangerously sited in the middle of the thoroughfare, is a clocktower which was completed in 1940. It was not expressly built to provide the inhabitants of Freetown with the correct time but to commemorate the life and contribution to the city of Frederick Gahne, M.D. While Dr. Gahne was and is the only private individual in Belize ever to have had a monument erected to him,¹ it is unlikely today that anyone could tell you much about him or why he was so deserving of such an honour.

Frederick Gahne was born on July 5th, 1841, in Omoa in the newly formed Republic of Honduras of distinguished parentage. His father was Cornelius Gahne of Curacao who, when he was eighteen, had fought under Bolivar in the Wars of Liberation. His mother, from whom Frederick presumably got his 'colour,' was a native of Belize and supposedly a descendant of 'Anthony'², who was reputed to be the first person to bring the news to the colony of the Spanish invasion threat in 1798. Cornelius was a man of some influence and wealth and the young Frederick was shipped off to Scotland when he was fifteen to benefit from a British education. He entered the University of Glasgow where he studied natural philosophy and mathematics at the eminent feet of Lords Lister and Kelvin.³

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In 1863 he graduated as a doctor, being placed second out of the one hundred students who had obtained their M.D.'s in that year.

Frederick returned to his mother's homeland two years later, after gaining some practical experience in London. He was at once made medical officer to the Chinese⁴ and Jamaican labourers employed by the British Honduras Company, and served in the same capacity with the British West India troops stationed in the north. This was the period of the 'Indian Raids' and he came under fire when on active service with Colonel Harley in the fight against Canul and the Icaiche in 1871-72. During these years he obtained a reputation as a fine doctor and, unusual at the time, as a 'gentleman' who showed sympathy and understanding for the common labourer and the ordinary soldier.

The next ten years of his life are shrouded in mystery. It is noted several times in the documents that he was for five years resident in Ruatan as Governor of the Bay Islands (ceded by Britain to Honduras in 1856), but how he obtained this post and in what manner he carried out his duties is unknown. For greater illumination we must wait until someone has a look at the Honduran records for those years.

NEWSPAPER AND POLITICS

In any event this period of administration seems to have encouraged him to combine medicine with an interest in public affairs. Exactly when he returned to Belize is not clear, but in 1882 he founded a weekly newspaper, the 'Colonial Guardian,' which had as its watchwords 'Salus populi suprema lex.' He was apparently publisher, editor, main contributor and printer at his North Front Street office.

The dictum of the newspaper was not merely empty rhetoric. The 'Colonial Guardian' was, until Gahne's death, the only substantial opposition newspaper⁵ and the scourge of the colonial administration. It was unfortunate (for Gahne, the Colonial Government and Belize) that the foundation of the newspaper coincided with tumultuous years in the history of the colony. The 'Colonial Guardian' became popular in the heat of the indignation created by the administration of Sir Roger Tuckfield Goldsworthy, and it was Gahne in his paper who led the attack on this tactless, bombastic and partial governor.⁶ The Goldsworthy era and its political consequences scarred Gahne for life, and led him to suspect the motives and

competence of each successive administrator thereby condemning him to perpetual opposition. This was particularly unfortunate at a time when the Colonial Government sorely needed men of his calibre and sincerity to overcome the invidious position into which the consequences of the Goldsworthy fiasco had placed it.

It was Gahne in fact who was primarily responsible for the creation of the 'People's Committee' of 1890 which sought to oppose the Hunter arbitration award⁷ and to seek for a change in the constitution. He was embittered not only by the high-handed actions of Goldsworthy and the duplicity of C.T. Hunter, but also by his running battle with C.H. Eyles, the Colonial Surgeon, over the causes of the outbreaks of yellow fever in the colony. This led him, in the 'Colonial Guardian,' to acclaim the 'walk-out' by the unofficial members of the Legislative Council in April 1890 and to support the demands of the 'People's Committee' for the unofficial majority. The 'tyranny' of the Goldsworthy administration had been so blatant that Gahne had become convinced that Crown Colony government was degrading, retrogressive and "pure despotism."⁸

The constitutional crisis of 1890-92 ended in January 1892 when the new governor, Sir Alfred Moloney, informed the leading citizens that Lord Knutsford, the Secretary of State, had agreed to accept the 'People's Committee' demands and allow the unofficial majority.⁹ Gahne, in the 'Colonial Guardian,' noted that "Thursday, the 21st instant, is a day that will ever be memorable in the history of the Colony; for on that day His Excellency the Governor announced that the Secretary of State had surrendered and that the Legislative Council was to have an unofficial majority."¹⁰ It was a victory for the 'People's Committee' and for Gahne, and the 'Colonial Guardian' which had been the public voice of that committee.

It was a victory however that began to trouble Gahne in the years that followed. After 1892 he found it more difficult to blame the administration entirely for the Colony's backwardness. The power to change the law and to spend the Colony's revenues now lay with the unofficial majority in the Legislative Council; in effect with the representatives of the members of the 'People's Committee' but in fact there was little change in the condition of the Colony. In the 'Colonial Guardian' Gahne campaigned for the development of agriculture, for the establishment of a model farm and industrial school, for

money to be spent on roads and a railway, for a reform of the pernicious labour law and for changes in the land tax and land tenure, but such reforms failed to materialise. It was as if the constitutional victory had never taken place, for it seemed to him that the rewards of that victory — the expected development of the Colony and the betterment of the living and working conditions of the Belizean labouring class — were ever retreating visions. As the years passed he groped around in his editorials seeking hard to find the person or persons responsible for this state of affairs. One week he would upbraid the Colonial Government and the Colonial Office, the next the landed monopolists and merchants; but to the day of his death he did not understand why the status quo remained unchanged.

It remained so because the constitutional victory of 1892 was a victory only for the self-seeking white and Creole elite of forest lords and merchants who made up the Colony's 'society.' The 'Public Meeting' did not include most of the public — the capital's working class — and the 'People's Committee' was a misnomer because the people were not represented; the signatories to the Committee's memorials and representations being mahogany contractors, landowners, merchants and mercantile clerks. 1892 was a victory for the vested interests of land and commerce which sought to regain the control of the legislature they had, in a fit of panic, so foolishly thrown away in 1870 because they feared for their monopolies of land, labour and trade should a reformist governor ever arrive at the Government House. It was the intention of these interests that the status quo which had made their predecessors rich should be preserved and, unwittingly, Frederick Gahne allowed himself to be made a tool of their designs.

LATER LIFE

Tragically, Gahne never comprehended the motives of these men or the consequences of the crisis he had helped to create. For the rest of his life he continued to produce the 'Colonial Guardian' and to do what he could to improve the capital and the way of life of its voiceless population. In November 1895 he became one of the first nominated members of the newly created Belize District Board and later (in 1911) when it became elective he topped the polls at the first election. It was said that he was the wisest and most hard-working member of the Board. Several times he was offered one of the unofficial seats on the Legislative Council, but he always refused this saying that he would be more useful to the community out-

side of that body. He probably realised that sooner or later he would be voting with the colonial administration against his old comrades of the 'People's Committee,' and this anomalous situation he was not prepared to face.

Frederick Gahne died at the age of 72 on Wednesday, June 11th, 1913, after a long and painful illness. He was buried¹¹ according to the rites of the Presbyterian Church (St. Andrews, the 'Scots Kirk') of which he had been an elder and a long and faithful communicant. With his death the 'Colonial Guardian' stopped publication despite the good intentions of some to keep it going. It was never resurrected. Soon after his death there were plans to construct a commemorative memorial to him, but that project was not brought to fruition until April of 1940, by which time memories of the old rebel were only dim recollections for most. Calvert Staine, the Chairman of the Town Board, who officially inaugurated the clocktower, admitted on that day that he knew little about the good doctor and was forced to use, as a source for his eulogy, the obituary to Gahne in the 'Clarion' of 1913.¹²

Frederick Gahne was both a Belizean hero and patriot. Firstly because he steadfastly criticised the Colonial Government and the Colonial Office for their neglect of Belize. He was not alone in this of course in the 1880's, but he alone of the 'People's Committee' did so for the cause of the public good — unlike his colleagues who were only interested in securing the power of the purse for themselves. Secondly because when he perceived that the victory of 1892 was a victory for a capitalist clique, "a worse oligarchy than the old House of Assembly,"¹³ he supported demands for a further change in the constitution which would bring back the elective principle. Thirdly because although a professional, a member of the upper class and a 'gentleman,' he sympathised with the plight of the Belizean labourer and attacked the evil labour law which held that worker "in a system. . . which approximates more to serfdom than freedom."¹⁴ Fourthly because he rejected the insidious and subtle racism and colour prejudice which existed in the colonial society of that time, declaring that even if humanitarian considerations were put aside blacks deserved equal status "at least because the black people of this Colony pay a large proportion of the taxes and consequently a considerable proportion of the salaries of all public officers."¹⁵ He was coloured himself and must have known the sting of discrimination. Fifthly because he consistently castigated the absentee landowners and rapacious

merchants who "exercised influence at the Colonial Office" while getting rich in Belize and "then leaving the Colony much as they found it — a huge mahogany work."¹⁷ Finally he was both hero and patriot because he believed in Belize. His education, medical degree and natural ability would have made him prosperous and respectable in Britain, but he chose rather the role of upper class agitator in the colonial backwater which was his home. His every remonstrance was for the uplift of his people and the defence of his colony. He reacted bitterly to foreign criticism of Belize (as common then as now), noting in 1902 (after a libellous article on the Belizean labourer in the British 'Daily Express') that "the children of the soil are not more advanced in the path of progress is due to centuries of oppression by the so-called Christians."¹⁸ He believed wholeheartedly in the words of Daniel Morris that Belize was "a magnificent land"¹⁹ which would grow all God's crops and that its Creole workforce was hardworking, capable and loyal. All the country needed for success was a sound administration, capital for development and the political will to get things done. In this he was ahead of his time.

This is not to say however that he was not possessed by some of the prejudices of his generation. He was not a democrat and opposed any suggestion of manhood suffrage which would take in the common labourer. This was "out of the question"²⁰ for "we can not ignore the fact that our woodcutters... are not quite intellectually on a par with the peasantry of the several West Indian islands."²¹ Nor was he particularly sympathetic towards the Garifuna of the south who were "unthrifty and uncivilised"²² or 'coolies' who were "pagan Asiatics whose dark souls have yet to be illumined by the light of Christianity and whose criminal proclivities are in direct ratio to such religious darkness."²³ Moreover, despite the evidence around him and his own testament to the contrary, he held in print that slavery in Belize had been akin to the social structure of the Scottish clans²⁴ and that "hostility of race and class was peculiarly absent from British Honduras."²⁵ It was a lie and he knew it, but faced with external critics he preferred to close ranks for the good of the Colony's image abroad.

Despite such prejudices and despite being seduced into abetting the designs of a disingenuous clique in 1890-92, Frederick Gahne was a great man. On the red granite tablet inset in the Barracks Road clocktower is inscribed "Frederick Gahne — A Champion of the People's Rights." In retrospect these words may appear to be some-

what ironic, coming as they did from the representatives of a privileged elite posing as democrats, but they were well earned. Corroboration, if any were needed, is also to be found in the testimony of Henry Melhado, who remembered Gahne as "a very upright man."²⁶

He once himself defined a civilised man as one whose philosophy of life was "to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God."²⁷ History acknowledges that Frederick Gahne, doctor, public servant and newspaperman extraordinary was a civilised man and a true son of Belize.

FREDERICK GAHNE: CHRONOLOGY

- 1841 (July 5th) Born at Omoa, Honduras
- 1841-55 Early life unknown, as is his place of residence
- 1855 Sent to Helensborough in Scotland
- 1856 Entered the University of Glasgow
- 1863 Graduated M.D.
- 1863-65 Practised in London
- 1865 Returned to Belize
- 1866-72 Medical officer to the British Honduras Company (the fore-runner of the BEC) and B.W.I.R. in the Northern District. Saw active service in the campaign against the Icaiche
- 1868 Married Evelyn Mary Adolphus, daughter of the Provost Marshal, by whom he had three sons
- 1872-81 During this period was the Governor of the Bay Islands
- 1881(?) Returned to Belize
- 1882 Founded the 'Colonial Guardian'
- 1882-1913 Campaigned in the 'Colonial Guardian' for the betterment of the Colony and its people
- 1884-90 Locked in conflict with the Colonial Surgeon and the Governor
- 1890 Founding member of the 'People's Committee'
- 1892 (January) Hailed the substitution of the official majority for an unofficial one as a great victory
- Death of his wife Evelyn Mary Gahne
- 1894 Claimed that the 'Labourers' Riot' of December was due to the merchants' exploitation of the working class
- 1895 Nominated member of the Belize District Board
- 1898 Called for the inclusion of the elective principle in the constitution
- 1902 Supported the Governor's attempts to liberalise the labour law
- 1911 Topped the poll in the election for the first Belize Town Board
- 1913 Died on June 11th

1. The city's other memorials take the form of parks (the Memorial Park) commemorating the war contingents; buildings (Paslow, Albert Cattouse); another clocktower (astride the Supreme Court commemorating the short administration of William Hart Bennett); and streets named after notable men (e.g. Cockburn, Cork, Hutson, Haynes, Cran, Mapp, etc.).
2. As no surname is given it can be presumed that "Anthony" was a slave.
3. Lister was the first doctor to make widespread use of antiseptics in surgery; Kelvin was a physicist after whom the absolute scale of temperature is named.
4. In 1865 six hundred Chinese labourers were brought to Belize to work for the British Honduras Company. The experiment was not very successful, as a large number of them escaped across the Hondo and joined up with the Santa Cruz Maya.
5. The 'Colonial Guardian' was the colony's only newspaper from 1882 to 1897 except for the intermittent 'Belize Advertiser' and the shortlived 'Times of Central America' (1893-94) and the 'Belize Independent' (1894-96). The 'Clarion' (later the 'Daily Clarion'), which lasted until the 1950's, was founded in 1897.
6. Sir Roger Tuckfield Goldsworthy, Lt. Governor and Governor of British Honduras (1884-90).
7. Space does not allow a recital of the events of 1884-1892 but they are recounted in Wayne Clegern's British Honduras: Colonial Dead End (Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 1967), pp. 75-85; and Clegern is summarised in Dobson's A History of Belize (Longman, London, 1973), pp. 301-03. Unfortunately neither historian appreciated the political consequences of the constitutional crisis they chronicled.
8. 'Colonial Guardian,' January 17, 1891.
9. A majority of unofficial members in the Legislative Council meant that those men could, if they so wished, combine to throw out any legislation introduced by the Executive. Between 1892 and 1932 (when the Governor obtained reserve powers) they did this very successfully. In essence this meant that Belize was no longer a true Crown Colony after 1892.
10. 'Colonial Guardian,' January 23, 1892.
11. I have not been able to find the site of Gahne's burial. If he was interred at Lord's Ridge there does not seem to be a headstone marking the grave.
12. 'Daily Clarion,' April 3, 1940.
13. 'Colonial Guardian,' June 25, 1898.
14. Ibid., March 26, 1910.

15. Ibid., March 8, 1902.
16. Ibid., September 8, 1894.
17. Ibid., February 1, 1902.
18. Ibid., October 18, 1902.
19. Ibid., May 7, 1904.
20. Ibid., May 4, 1895.
21. Ibid., June 25, 1898.
22. Ibid., April 5, 1890.
23. Ibid., December 12, 1891.
24. Ibid., April 2, 1898.
25. Ibid., December 27, 1890, and September 22, 1906.
26. Evidence of Henry Melhado to Wayne Clegern. Quoted in Clegern, op. cit., p. 194. It is obvious too that Clegern came to respect and admire Gahne as must any historian who follows his public life through the pages of the 'Colonial Guardian.'
27. 'Colonial Guardian,' May 28, 1898.



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